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AUTHOR Lehr, Fran
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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest explores the relationship between television viewing habits and reading achievement. The digest first examines recent research indicating a negative relationship between television viewing in excess of ten hours and reading performance. The digest next focuses on the effects of television viewing on reading habits and reading material preferences. Finally, the digest discusses how educators can use television to promote reading. (DF)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

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Television Viewing and Reading

The average child entering first grade has spent nearly 5,000 hours watching television, and that same child by age eighteen will have spent more time watching television than attending school (Flinn 1980). Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (1988) indicate a continued deficiency in advanced reading skills among students in all age groups and a leveling-off of the upward trend in the reading performance of nine- and eleven-year-old children between 1980 and 1984. In addition, a survey by the Book Industry Study Group (1984) shows that the proportion of young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one who read regularly declined from 75 percent in 1978 to 63 percent in 1983. While researchers have explored the relationships between televiewing and reading performance for more than a decade, figures such as these are prompting a renewed interest in the subject. This digest will look at recent research dealing with (1) the relationship between amount of televiewing and reading performance, (2) the effects of televiewing on reading habits and preferences, and (3) how educators can use television to promote reading.

What Is the Relationship between Amount of Television Viewing and Reading Performance?

Research on relationships between amount of televiewing and reading has generally shown negative correlations between large amounts of viewing and reading achievement. But sophisticated methodologies reveal the connection to be complex. In a 1982 meta-analysis of twenty-three studies dealing with television and achievement in various academic areas, Williams and her colleagues (1982) showed that some televiewing was beneficial, with viewing up to ten hours a week correlating positively with reading achievement. Beyond this amount, however, the correlation is negative; reading achievement declines sharply with increased viewing.

Bossing and Burgess (1984) found low reading scores more common among third-grade students who watched more than twenty-two hours of television a week. They did not, however, suggest this to be a cause-and-effect relationship. The NAEP surveys from 1980 to 1984 reveal that students who watch up to two hours of television per day (up to five hours a day for nine-year-olds) have reading proficiency levels above average for their age groups, but that viewing levels of six or more hours a day are consistently and strongly related to lower proficiency across age groups.

Bachen and her colleagues (1982) studied connections among second-, third-, and sixth-grade students' socioeconomic status; home environment; television usage, including amount of time spent viewing; cognitive involvement, including reasons for viewing; and reading achievement. While amount of viewing was related to low achievement, the stronger negative influence was related to the reasons for watching television. Children who watched in order to escape from family or school concerns read less and scored lower in achievement.

Does Televiewing Affect Reading Habits and Preferences?

There is some evidence that children who are heavy television viewers dislike reading and tend to read materials of lower quality. Neuman and Prowda (1981) gathered information about viewing habits, reading attitudes, and reading materials in the homes of more than 8,000 fourth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade students in Connecticut. The number of students reporting "enjoyment" of reading decreased with age, while the number of those reporting a "dislike" of reading increased. Neuman (1982) looked at students' preferences for reading or television viewing and the quality of their leisure reading material. Approximately 200 middle-class students in grades 4–6 kept television and reading logs for a month. Using the Gray and Rogers Reading Maturity Scale to rate quality of materials read, Neuman found that students who preferred reading to television read the highest quality books, while heavy television viewers (more than three hours a day) and light readers (fewer than two books a month) chose books of lower quality.

Morgan (1980) used scores on standardized achievement and IQ tests, as well as data completed by more than 600 students and their parents, representing a variety of socioeconomic levels, to examine how reading habits and preferences were related to televiewing. He concluded that heavy viewers (more than five hours a day) tended to read teen romances and books about celebrities, while light viewers (under three and a half hours) read science fiction, mysteries, and general nonfiction.

How Can Educators Use Television to Promote Reading?

Children do learn from television, and educators can use its appeal to improve reading skills and promote leisure reading. Activities that involve adult guidance and selective viewing seem to be the most effective. For example, Mangieri and Arthur (1978) investigated the effects of "guided television viewing" on listening skills and found that third-grade children who received such guidance scored higher on standardized listening and reading tests than did students who received instruction from an educational publisher's listening laboratory program.

Lee (1980) examined student, teacher, and parent reactions to a program in which elementary school students read scripts prior to viewing television shows and then engaged in class discussions and other activities related to the show. Over-

whelmingly, teachers, students, and parents thought the program increased student interest in and enjoyment of reading. Students reported that the program enhanced their story comprehension and appreciation of characterization, and teachers said it worked well with all reading levels.

The CBS Television Reading Program (1979) uses scripts of shows—especially those adapted from classic literary works—as the basis for discussion and reading activities. Evaluations have generally been positive. Teachers report that the program prompts junior high school students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds to read worthwhile materials and increases their motivation to read.

Television rivals both the family and the school as a shaping force in the lives of children, a situation not likely to change soon. There is a distinct need for efforts that involve both parents and educators in finding methods to help students become selective, critical viewers who can deal proficiently with both visual and print media.

Fran Lehr, ERIC/RCS

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1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801
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